
Changing Demographics in King County



King County

Department of
Community and Human Services

As part of the review of the Veterans and Human Services Levy, this paper provides an overview of how the demographics and indicators of community need have changed in King County since the Levy was passed in 2005. Overall, the population has increased, become more ethnically diverse, and many of our residents continue to face the challenges of poverty and unemployment, particularly in the midst of our continuing economic crisis.

We are growing and becoming more diverseⁱ.

Overall, the King County population grew nine percent between 2005 and 2009. This increase is due to new births, relocation from within the United States, and immigration. King County's current population is nearly 2 million, (1,916,441) up from 1,755,818 in 2005.

Our population remains ethnically diverse. Currently, 28 percent of our population is comprised of people of color, including people who are multi-racial or multi-ethnic. This represents a small increase from 27 percent in 2005. The largest community continues to be Asian/Pacific Islanders (13.5%).

The share of our population that is foreign-born is rising. Currently, more than one in five King County residents (21%) identifies as foreign-born. This demonstrates an increasing trend from 17 percent in 2005. Between 2005 and 2009, 42,035 new foreign-born residents moved to King County. The largest share of these residents emigrated from Asia.

Many of our foreign-born residents are refugees with complex needs. King County has long been a hub for immigrants and refugees. Since 1984, King County has received the fifth largest number of refugees in the United States. Because of the complex international refugee resettlement system, refugees often come in waves. While migration from the former Soviet Union has decreased in recent years, since 2006, we have seen a sharp spike in migrants from Near/East Asia, particularly Bhutan and Burma. From January to June 2010, Iraqis represented the majority of refugees screened by Seattle-King County Public Health. In addition to newly arriving refugees, many immigrants relocate to King County in order to join others from their ethnic group. These new residents often face enormous challenges as they integrate into American society. Their hurdles can include past trauma, language barriers, isolation, poverty, and disability.

More residents speak a language other than English at home. Not only does one in five King County residents speak a language other than English, but there is immense language diversity throughout the county. Over 150 different languages are spoken by children in our public schools. While these children receive English language instruction, many adults do not have access to this type of training, leaving them without access to mainstream services. The share of residents who speak a language other than

English at home is increasing. Between 2005 and 2009, the number of these residents increased by 15 percent and their share of the total population rose from 21 percent to 22 percent.

Many King County residents remain in poverty or are unemployed.

Since 2004, the poverty level in King County has remained relatively flat, hovering around 10 percentⁱⁱ. Currently, nearly 50,000 children in King County live in poverty. The federal poverty level is extremely low, thus this indicator does not account for the many families and individuals who do not meet the definition of poverty, but do not earn a living wage and struggle to make ends meet. The current level for a single person is \$10,830 and the rate for a family of four is \$22,050.

More families are facing unemployment. While lower than the national or Washington state average, unemployment continues to take a toll on many households in King County. Just in 2009, the rate spiked from 6.7 percent in January to nearly nine percent in December. In 2010, the rate began to fall in the first quarter and has since risen to the October 2010 level of 8.8 percent. In addition, many so called “99-ers” have exhausted their benefits, even after the federal extension to 99 weeks. A total of 5,048 people in King County have run-out of employment insurance since November 2009.

Bankruptcy and foreclosures have risen. A point of last resort, bankruptcy is an extreme indicator of personal economic conditions. In 2010, bankruptcies rose 15 percent in Seattle and 20 percent in King County compared to 2009. In October 2010, there were 1,419 bankruptcies filed in Seattle courts and 722 bankruptcies filed in King County courts. Similarly, foreclosures continue to rise, jumping 66 percent from 11,268 to 11,919 between 2008 and 2009. Foreclosures are concentrated in South King County. For example, in Kent, one in every 420 homes received a foreclosure filing in November 2010. In Auburn, the rate was one in every 387 homes compared to one in every 1,043 in Redmond.

Eligibility for free and reduced price lunch has increasedⁱⁱⁱ. In communities throughout King County, more children are struggling to meet their nutritional needs. Between 2009 and 2010, most school districts saw a rise in the percentage of students who qualified for free or reduced lunch. To qualify, families must have an income at or less than 130% of the federal poverty level for free lunch and at or below 185% for reduced price lunch. For some areas, particularly in South King County, nearly half or more of the students qualify: Seattle (42%) Highline (44%), Renton (46 %), Federal Way (47 %), Kent (47 %), Auburn (49 %), Skykomish (69 %), and Tukwila (70%).

ⁱ American Community Survey, United States Census Bureau

ⁱⁱ Communities Count Report, 2005 and November, 2010 Update.

ⁱⁱⁱ Communities Count Report, September, 2010 Update